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ABSTRACT

In the 1980s several qualitative studies of midwestern public high schools that serve students of color were conducted. Many teachers attempted to reach these students by adopting culturally responsive teaching strategies. While some teachers insisted that abandoning traditional pedagogy was to give up on socially legitimate teaching, others tried to narrow the social distance between themselves and their students by building personal relationships and by taking students' ways of life into account in making decisions about teaching. Anecdotes and vignettes illustrate some successful and unsuccessful approaches. Some teachers who tried to bridge cultural differences were perceived as condescending or phony or were criticized by students for ignoring things students thought they would need to know in the mainstream world of education and society. Observation of successful teachers suggests that it is important for the teacher to act in a manner that students regard as appropriate for teachers, to provide them with information needed for mainstream educational activities, to acknowledge their social identities and cultures in curriculum and instruction, and to invite them to explore multicultural perspectives. (Contains 17 references.) (SLD)

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Culturally Responsive Teaching: When and How High School Teachers Should Cross Cultural Boundaries to Reach Students

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Culturally Responsive Teaching: When and How High School Teachers Should Cross Cultural Boundaries to Reach Students

During the 1980's, I was a researcher involved in several qualitative studies of Midwestern public high schools serving students of color. Included among the study sites was a school on a Native American reservation called Fox River High. Also observed were two desegregated comprehensive high schools. Norwood East High served mostly working-class White and African-American youths; Lincoln High was a college-preparatory magnet school which had a racially and socially mixed student population. Another site was Charles Drew High, an all-Black public school located in an impoverished urban neighborhood.

With the exception of Lincoln High, which enrolled highly-motivated students drawn to the school's academically rigorous programs, many of the students of color attending the schools were "at risk" of falling behind in or out of school. They put pressure on teachers to eliminate or simplify much of the curriculum they were expected to learn. And yet, despite these students' resistance, the majority of teachers did their best to uphold dominant mainstream notions of what constitutes legitimate classroom goals, methods of instruction, and academic standards. They continued to depend on lectures, recitations, guided practice and other conventional whole-group instructional methods to convey the mostly college-preparatory knowledge found in textbooks. They did so regardless of their students' backgrounds and aspirations for the future. The teachers clung to this

pedagogy, some fighting hard to defend it, despite the fact that it clearly failed to engage many students of color in the learning process. They felt that to abandon traditional pedagogy was to give up "real" or socially legitimate teaching (Hemmings & Metz, 1990).

But there were a few teachers in these educational settings who attempted to reach students of color by adopting culturally responsive teaching strategies. These teachers thought that being reponsive to students' needs meant narrowing the social distance between themselves and the adolescents in their courses. By building strong, personal relationships with students, they felt certain they would be in a better position to diagnose learning problems, and to provide effective assistance. To be *culturally* responsive not only involved the strengthening of teacher/student relations, but it also meant taking into account students' way of life when making decisions about what and how to teach. The teachers sensed what research has documented: Students whose natal lifestyles are incongruent with mainstream school culture often withdraw from the learning process because they are misinterpreting or in conflict with mainstream classroom expectations. Many young African Americans, Native Americans, and other children of color reject mainstream curriculum and the norms typically governing classroom achievement because they view them as being somehow inappropriate for them. (Erickson, 1987, 1984; Spindler, 1987; Trueba, Spindler & Spindler, 1988).

The teachers who tried to raise the achievement of students of color by being culturally responsive adopted curriculum, instructional methods, and classroom demeanors they thought were more compatible with their students' natal cultures. Young people are more willing to learn in school when teachers organize classroom experiences in ways that take into account the language, learning styles, values, and knowledge they encounter at home or in the groups with whom they most identify (Au, 1979; Hale-Benson, 1986; Heath, 1983; Jordan, 1985; Nieto, 1992; Trueba, 1984;1987). They are more likely not to resist teachers when pedagogies are congruent with the understandings and identities embraced by the members of the communities within which they belong or hope to belong.

With some exceptions, these high school teachers were successful at being responsive; they managed to establish a rapport with students of color that allowed them to both identify and address many of these youths' problems. But many were not successful at being culturally responsive. As is described in the sections that follow, a few were unsuccessful because they acted in ways students deemed inappropriate for teachers. Also, while most of the teachers incorporated aspects of students' culture into their pedagogies, in some contexts they did not do nearly enough to increase students' understanding of mainstream academic culture. Others failed because they affirmed what they perceived to be students' culture without first recognizing the

important role that social identity plays in students' relationship to curriculum.

Being Responsive

"In pedagogy," Erickson points out, "it is essential that the teacher and students establish and maintain trust in each other (1987:344)." Adolescents often will not learn what they are expected to learn in school if they judge their teachers to be untrustworthy. If, that is, they believe their instructors do not care about them or their progress.

In many of the classrooms I observed, there was a great deal of mistrust between teachers and students of color. The teachers, most of whom were white and middle-class, had a difficult time relating to ethnically diverse adolescents whose actions and modes of interaction challenged conventional norms of classroom achievement. They tried to create the kind of trust they thought was necessary for achievement by constructing what they regarded as appropriate teacher/student relations. From the teachers' perspective, appropriate teacher/student relations were largely impersonal and formal. Teachers thought students should trust their judgements regarding learning objectives, classroom activities, and standards, and to abide by their decisions. They expected students to behave in a manner that recognized teachers as the sole authority over what and how learning ought to take place.

But many students of color were not inclined to go along

with such understandings of their proper role in the classroom. They did not always follow their teachers' lead because much of what they were asked to do and learn, using one student's phrase, simply "made no sense" to them in terms of their cultural experiences or their social identities. The more teachers tried to make students conform to conventional norms of achievement, the more resistant students became. Teacher/student interactions in many classrooms became highly conflictual; in other classrooms, teachers felt they had little choice but to appease students by requiring less work and lowering academic standards.

The teachers who sought to raise achievement by being culturally responsive began by cultivating more personal relationships with students of color. They accomplished this by engaging students during class in forms of discourse and joint activities characteristic of informal social interactions. Most of them adopted "conversational" styles of instruction in order to communicate with students of color in a more meaningful, less conflictual manner. They permitted the students to express their thoughts freely, and by doing so hoped to create better communication channels. Such channels are vital; they can be effective avenues for developing students' language and literacy skills, and for conveying curricular knowledge (Tharp, R.G. & Gallimore, R. 1988; Wehlage, G., Rutter, R. A.; Smith, G.A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R.R.,1989). Conversational styles of instruction also provided students of color with opportunities to

express their opinions about the pedagogies their teachers selected, and to otherwise participate in classroom decision-making processes. Teacher/student relations in these instructors' classrooms were notably less strained and more democratic.

Responsive teachers did more than encourage free verbal exchanges. Most of them also confirmed students of color. Noddings (1988; 1984) defines confirmation as an individual revealing to another person "an attainable image of himself that is lovelier than that manifested in his present acts" (1988:193). As many teachers got to know students of color and their interests, fears, and hopes, they encouraged the youths to think about how they might live productive, fulfilling lives. They listened to students, offered advice, and otherwise used highly supportive, non-confrontational means to foster adolescents' academic and personal growth.

One teacher who was very responsive to students was Ms. Goldsmith, an African-American English teaching employed at an urban school called Norwood East High. I spent over six months in this school during the 1987-88 school year studying how three high-achieving African-American juniors were being prepared for college. Norwood East High enrolled over 2000 African-American and white students most of whom were growing up in working-class families. Only 34% of the school's students scored above the national average on a standardized reading test administered by

the district. Over 30% of students dropped out, and less than 25% of seniors entered post-secondary educational programs after graduation. Over 90% of Norwood East faculty were White; less than 10% were African American. Inside many Norwood East classrooms, relationships between teachers and students of color were not very positive. But this was not the case in Ms. Goldsmith's English classes. Ms. Goldsmith was an African-American woman whom one boy described as a "cool lady" not only because she let students express their views in class, but also because she "listens to us no matter how outrageous or off-the-wall we are." This teacher set aside time both in and out of class for students to talk with her about their concerns. She offered counsel and helped many students to work out their personal problems. But as the following classroom observation indicates, Ms. Goldsmith was not able to use the rapport she had established to convince her students to master mainstream English curriculum.

Ms. Goldsmith attempted to conduct a discussion about Poe's poem "The Raven" in her junior-level American Authors English course. She began by reading outload the first few verses of the poem, and then asked students what they thought the lines meant. Two African-American girls immediately started to caw like crows. Another one proclaimed loudly that she would read this and other rhymes "nevermore, nevermore." This remark prompted students, both Black and White, to make other irreverent

pokes at the text.

Frustrated by her failed attempt to generate a serious discussion, Ms. Goldsmith asked the class why they would not give "The Raven" a chance. Karen, an African-American girl who usually sat quietly in the back of the room, suddenly spoke up and expressed in an angry voice what appeared to be the sentiment of the class:

> It's because the story don't make no sense. There ain't no plot. It don't say nothin'. All we know is that the author makin' up rhymes about a black bird that come through his window. It's a stupid story.

Ms. Goldsmith quickly ended the discussion, and instead played an audio tape of the poem. While the tape was running, students chatted among themselves and otherwise lapsed into inattentiveness. Ms. Goldsmith explained later that try as she might she just did not know how to make her subject more interesting to students. She and other responsive teachers wanted to make mainstream curriculum more meaningful to students, but they encountered many difficulties because they did not know when or how to cross cultural boundaries.

Crossing cultural boundaries

Some of the teachers who attempted to be "culturally" responsive thought they could raise achievement levels by developing curriculum, instructional practices, and classroom demeanors that were congruent with what they perceived to be

their students' cultures. A White male teacher at Norwood East High tried to connect African-American students to mainstream curriculum by rendering the material into rap songs, and by presenting the material in local Black dialect. But rather than enhancing African-Americans' appreciation for the curriculum, he deepened their alienation. Students were insulted by the teacher's approach and often complained about it. One Black boy got so fed up during one of the teacher's classes, that he lost his temper, and shouted "Why do you keep mocking us? What did we ever do to you?" The teacher was stunned by the outburst. He thought he had been getting through to African-American students, but instead he had managed to enrage them. The students were angry because they did not think it was appropriate for him or, for that matter, any other teacher to act like them. And they certainly did not like anyone who appeared to be making fun of their way of life. The teacher made the mistake of trying to cross firmly-established cultural boundaries, and then compounded the situation by his inept efforts to express African-American student culture. It proved to be a costly mistake.

Students of color in all of the study sites expected teachers to act like teachers. They had certain beliefs about the characteristics "good" instruction. Eliza, one of my key student informants at Norwood East, was quite open about what and how she thought her instructors should teach. An African American who planned on going to college, she was very upset with

her teachers because they had failed to teach her "how to talk and write like someone who is educated." The following excerpt from a conversation we had reveals the extent of her frustrations:

> My English teacher last year told us to write about the meaning of a story that was three hundred years old. I was sittin' there saying to myself "what do the author mean?" I guess you supposed to think back three hundred years ago to see what that man was thinking. I couldn't do that so I started to cry. I be like cryin' and cryin' 'cause I don't know what that man was thinking.

Eliza felt that her years in high school had been "wasted" because of "dummy teachers who all they do is holler at people who aren't learning." What she and many other students of color wanted were teachers who were able to maintain control without, as one boy said, "being mean." They also wanted teachers who were willing to provide them with whatever assistance they needed to pass their courses. Eliza expected teachers to do even more than this; she wanted her instructors to do a better job of teaching her the language, styles of discourse, norms, and other cultural traits she believed she needed to thrive in college. "Good teachers," in her mind, provided clear and explicit lessons in how to think and act like a college student.

Teachers upholding traditional pedagogy generally did not

spend a lot of time showing students of color how to complete assignments because they felt that learning comes about when individuals struggle with curriculum on their own. Most did very little to teach students how to negotiate mainstream society and institutions. Eliza felt these teachers' position was wrong for students like her. She and others felt they should not be left alone to master curriculum and cultural traits that made little or no sense to them. They wanted extra, more effective assistance.

Trevor received the kind of help Elize demanded. He was a working-class African-American boy who went to Lincoln High. Like Eliza, he felt he needed more than occasional help with his homework to fulfill his aspirations. That was why he decided to go to Lincoln High.

Lincoln High was a desegregated magnet school for the college bound. It offered academically rigorous programs such as International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement courses. Lincoln students were required to study a foreign language, and to take four years of mathematics, science, and English. Less than 5% of Lincoln students dropped out, and more than 80% of the school's graduates attended four-year colleges.

Trevor went to Lincoln expecting to get "a private school education for free." He also expected, and got, a lot of help. He told of how as a freshman he floundered in his studies because he could not grasp the kinds of meanings teachers wanted students

to attach to the material covered in class. He was experiencing a great deal of confusion until his History teacher took the time to teach him what he referred to as the "deeper meanings" in books. What the teacher did was meet with him after school to explain in detail how mainstream academicians interpret scholarly and artistic works. It was the sort of instruction for which Eliza longed; it was a thorough initiation into the subtle and complex understandings that govern academic discourse. This teacher built a bridge between Trevor's world and that of mainstream academic circles. She provided the kind of effective assistance that enabled him to cross mainstream cultural boundaries.

Eliza and Trevor welcomed any assistance from teachers willing to help them learn curriculum and academic culture because of their strong mainstream social identities. But many students of color did not have such an identity, and they were not as inclined to assimilate into another culture. These students required different forms of culturally responsive teaching, ones that acknowledged their social indentities.

Acknowledging social identity

High school students' relationship to curriculum was very much influenced by their social identities. Social identity is an individual's sense of self in relation to others. People identify with some groups, and distance themselves from others. They internalize their group's understandings about what they can

or ought to hope for economically, politically, and personally (Steinitz & Solomon, 1986). And they display their identity by looking and acting in ways deemed appropriate by group members.

It became apparent that students of color were more willing to learn in class when pedagogies took into account their social identities. Culturally reponsive teachers who, like many of the instructors I observed at Fox River High, acknowledged students' social identities generally met with more success than those who did not.

Fox River High was a newly built public school located on a Native American reservation. The school's curriculum had been developed by teachers in collaboration with members of the tribe, and thus reflected reservation traditions. Fox River students were required to study their tribe's native language, and they learned about other native customs in most of their other courses. Before Fox River was opened, the Native American students were bussed to Lakeview High, a school situated in a predominantly White community. At Lakeview High, the drop out rate for Native American students was over 60%. A Native American secretary employed at Fox River High told of how Lakeview's principal had encouraged her and other Indian students to drop out when they turned sixteen. Most did drop out, not only because they felt unwelcome, but also because the material they were asked to learn "was for White people only." The drop out rate at Fox River was much lower, around 30%, in part because

the curriculum affirmed students' social identities. Many of the students interviewed spoke about how proud they were to be members of their tribe, and they indicated in other ways their strong identification with tribal groups. They liked their new school because, according to a boy, "we learn about who we are so we can live on and on forever."

Fox River students also were expected to master mainstream curriculum. But while they clearly enjoyed studying tribal lore, they did not especially like learning conventional curriculum. This concerned teachers who believed it was in the interest of Native American peoples to become thoroughly familiar with mainstream or "White people's" ways. They needed to be able to negotiate mainstream institutions so that they could take advantage of opportunities to improve their own and their tribe's impoverished economic conditions. Convincing students that they ought to learn curriculum regarded as being for "White people only" was an identified problem; a problem that ultimately had its roots in the tribe's long, historical mistrust of White society.

A notably different scenerio emerged at Lincoln High. Lincoln High was a college-preparatory magnet school that attracted mostly middle-class students and middle-class aspirants. As was the case with Eliza and Trevor, most Lincoln students had mainstream social identities; they longed to belong to professional, middle-class social circles.

Ms. Patrick was a White English teacher at Lincoln. Before coming to Lincoln, she had taught at Kennedy High, a working-class school very much like Norwood East. She had also earned a masters degree in English literature at a nearby university. Both her experiences at Kennedy and her graduate coursework in feminist literary criticism caused this teacher to regard Western literary classics, which are the mainstay of high school English curriculum, as "tools White men use to oppress women and people of color." She had been disturbed about the underachievement of many of the young working-class women and African-Americans she taught at Kennedy, and believed that the way to empower these youths was to expose them to a multicultural English canon. So rather than require Kennedy students to read Shakespeare and other Western classics, she assigned works written by women and people of color. She claimed that the texts were well received at Kennedy, so she decided to require Lincoln students to read her multicultural canon believing that they, too, would be drawn to the texts it contained.

But most of the young women and African Americans enrolled in Ms. Patrick's Contemporary American Literature class did not feel they were being empowered by the multicultural canon. To the contrary, they thought their teacher was holding them back and many resented her approach. These and other students resisted her curriculum as was demonstrated during a discussion about a short story written by Tillie Olsen entitled "I Stand

Here Ironing." The story is about a woman who is deeply troubled because she realizes her daughter, Emily, is emotionally disturbed. The woman had not been able to take proper care of Emily when she was small because she had been abandoned by her first husband and could not find adequate support. Rather than go along with Ms. Patrick's attempts to point out what she regarded as terrible injustices caused by a male-dominated sociopolitical system, many Black students made fun of the tale or condemned the mother for not doing a better job of raising her child. None, except two African-American girls, was willing to consider seriously Ms. Patrick's interpretation of the story.

I observed a number of classes at Lincoln, and never saw students put up the level or kind of resistance that occured in this English class. Not wanting to leave me with a bad impression, a contigent of students taking the course cornered me one day in order to defend their behavior. The leader of the group, an African-American girl named Camille, explained that she and her classmates opposed Ms. Patrick because they did not like being treated like Kennedy kids. She said they were "serious scholars" and felt they should be treated that way. When I told one of my high-achieving African-American informants about the conversation, she said, "I know who they are and why they're so mad. They think they should be reading Hemingway and instead they're getting these wierd books." African-American students at Lincoln High were objecting to a curriculum they felt did not

prepare them for life in mainstream professional groups. They rejected Ms. Patrick's version of culturally responsive teaching because her approach was not in line with who they they thought they were. The multicultural English canon she developed did not go far enough to acknowledge Lincoln students' view of themselves as "serious scholars" with aspirations to go to college.

Ms. Patrick was perturbed about Lincoln students' reaction to the texts she asked them to read. She felt they should know and be concerned about the experiences of oppressed groups living in the United States. Indeed, culturally responsive teachers believed it was important to cultivate in students of color a multicultural consciousness - a knowledge of and appreciation for the cultures of different groups including those of mainstream Americans. But most were unable to stretch students' consciousness beyond the cultural orientations associated with their own social identities.

There was a teacher at Charles Drew High named Ms. North who managed to connect students to curriculum, and did so by encouraging them to interpret texts from their own and other groups' perspectives. Charles Drew High was a school in a large city that served low-income Black youths growing up in surrounding neighborhoods. Absenteeism and the drop out rate were high at Charles Drew, and student achievement levels were well below city averages. But students showed up to Ms. North's English classes where there was a great deal of enthusiasm for

learning. Ms. North was an award-winning African-American teacher whose overriding goal was to "get young people past their own little neighborhood and out into the big, wide world." Her effectiveness as a teacher was due in part to her determination to teach Black students not only about the different roles they might assume as adults, but about how "different people read different things into books and what happens around them." She wanted young African Americans to be able to interpret literary works and events from multiple perspectives so that they could "explore more possibilities for their lives," and move more easily between diverse social contexts.

Ms. North asked students to read Western literary classics and a few works written by African Americans. She liked to conduct discussions about assigned texts in what can be described as an open, free-ranging conversational style. But observations revealed that she had a habit of leading these conversations in a particular direction. After summarizing the plot of a story, Ms. North let students express whatever thoughts they had about the text. One way or another, she eventually would encourage students to talk about if or how their actions might differ from those of the characters in the story. She invited students to think about the story using their own perspectives and experiences. Then Ms. North would wonder why the people in the story did what they did, and when students were not sure, which was often the case, she would try and explain the characters'

actions from the point of view of the author or from other people's perspectives. Students loved these discussions, and most were intrigued by Ms. North's accounts of how different people interpret similar events. Ms. North's discussions were among the many non-confrontational ways in which she confirmed Black students, but they also were instructionally effective because they made the curriculum more meaningful by acknowledging students' social identities and those of others. This teacher was quite succesful at expanding students' social consciousness.

Summary

Teachers, like Ms. North, who were successful at raising the achievement of students of color by developing culturally responsive teaching strategies all began by getting to know students as persons, and by creating open communication channels. They listened to students, and took careful note of their lifestyles, social identities, and especially their expectations for teachers. They understood that to reach adolescents who have a difficult time relating to mainstream curriculum, it is often necessary to:

1. Act in a manner that students regard as appropriate for teachers;
2. Provide students with more explicit, in depth instruction in the language, norms, and other understandings governing life in mainstream educational institutions;

3. Acknowledge students' social identities and cultures in curriculum and instructional practices; and
4. Invite students to explore multiple perspectives.

In short, to be culturally responsive is to both confirm and affirm students.

Footnotes

1 My masters thesis is based on a study I conducted of Fox River High in the fall of 1980. The focus of this study was whether or how teachers integrated tribal traditions into their curriculum and instructional practices. During the 1986-87 school year, I was a research assistant for a project headed by Dr. Mary Haywood Metz. We used qualitative research methods to study the work lives of teachers employed in eight socially and culturally diverse high schools. This project, which included observations of Charles Drew High, was housed in the National Center on Effective Secondary Schools at the Wisconsin Center on Educational Research and Improvement, and was supported by a grant from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement. For my dissertation, I studied the experiences of six high-achieving African-American juniors enrolled at Lincoln and Norwood East High School. I collected data for this study during the 1987-88 school year.

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